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ABSTRACT

Certain events between the late sixties and the eighties were major influences in empowering Australian reading teachers to break the basal habit. During the late sixties a growing number of elementary classroom teachers and principals were showing an interest in classroom practices that focused on children's individual progression. During the early seventies, a number of "alternative education" or "non-graded" schools emerged, and teacher training institutions began to adapt courses to reflect contemporary trends. During the mid-seventies schools became progressively more literature-based, and made use of new books such as Don Holdaway's "Core Library." During the late seventies, curriculum evaluation became the responsibility of the school. In addition, the value of standardized tests was becoming widely questioned. Finally, during the eighties, a study of a New Zealand teacher training system resulted in the development and implementation of the Early Literacy Inservice Course. By the mid-to-late eighties, individual publishers could no longer market basal readers; evaluation became increasingly dependent on the teacher's observations, records, and samples of work; and publishers, teachers, and academics began to collaborate to develop a broad range of valid materials for the classroom. Some reasons why teachers were so willing to break away from dependence on basal texts include the empowerment of teachers through the political acceptance of alternatives, training, a grass roots movement, and cooperative effort. (PRA)

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EMPOWERING TEACHERS TO BREAK THE BASAL HABIT

Rodney D.Martin, Adv.Dip.T.,B.Ed.

I hope to give you an overview, through my own experiences as a classroom teacher, of the conditions under which South Australian elementary schools discovered that there was indeed life after the basal.

After completing a rather traditional teacher training course, I began my teaching career in 1966 in South Australia, when basal readers and a prescribed curriculum were the order of the day. Friday morning was given to testing the week's work and examinations were conducted at the end of each of the three terms in the year. In effect, I was teaching in a manner and circumstance not very far removed from my own childhood school experiences.

When I left teaching in 1980 in South Australia, basal readers were not recommended by the State Education Department. Individual schools and teachers were responsible for the choice of classroom reading materials and the curriculum was presented as a set of guidelines describing beliefs about learning, and recommended practices. The recommended evaluation tools were observation notes and work samples; standardized tests were used with individuals or groups if and when a teacher decided further evidence was useful.

During those 14 years an assortment of influences, some planned and some co-incidental, played a part in the large scale movement of elementary school teachers away from dependence on basal readers. This movement was evident across Australia -- in some states to a greater extent than others.

Certain events, I believe, were major influences in bringing about the considerable change that took place in many schools between the late sixties and the eighties. I was personally involved with some of these events. Others were removed from my immediate situation, but significantly influenced my work as a teacher. I think that what becomes apparent is that effecting change in human practices in the classroom is a study in communication as much as a study of pedagogical beliefs, curriculum statements, and teaching resources.

During the late sixties

Statewide centralized control of the curriculum existed. Curriculum content and practices were mandated at the State Education Department level and supervised by education department inspectors. Textbooks were selected centrally, bulk purchased

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through the education department and distributed to schools. Schools simply decided on the basis of enrolments and existing stock of books, how many of a textbook they would need. Little curriculum decision-making was left in the hands of the teacher.

Use of standardized tests was wide-spread, but implemented at the choice of the school. Results were used by teachers in an attempt to measure pupil performance, but results were not published.

A growing number of elementary classroom teachers and principals were showing an interest in classroom practices that focused on children's individual progression. Teaching resources that influenced this at the time included the SRA reading laboratories.

Some teachers formed interest groups. Such groups would sometimes organize their own weekend conferences to hear speakers, discuss issues, share ideas and explore possible solutions to problems.

This was also the age of the "baby boomer" teacher force -- thousands of youthful, energetic teachers entering schools in a time of great growth and optimism.

<u>During the early seventies</u>

In 1970, I moved into one of South Australia's first two experimental "non-graded" elementary schools. Over the next few years, a number of "alternative education" or "non-graded" elementary schools, both private and state, emerged in various parts of Australia. Such schools had the blessing of the state education authorities on an experimental basis. Teachers and educators from the whole spectrum of education systems visited these schools to observe teachers attempting to put into practice alternatives to centralized curricula.

Teacher training institutions began to focus on the new movement and adapt or re-write courses to reflect contemporary trends.

Curriculum boards for the first time included classroom teachers and representatives from various parent groups. Politicians and top level educational public servants were recognizing the validity of curricula being influenced by a wider range of voices.

In practice, basal readers were still being chosen and supplied through a centralized system, but lists of children's novels were being added to the central system, and schools were beginning to make some choices outside the centralized supply system. However, the basal still reigned supreme in a majority of schools. Standardized tests were still used by choice.

During the mid-seventies

In 1975, the first four big books were published. Their entry had a dramatic effect in that:

* they were so novel, they gathered much attention;
* they caused many teachers to examine the application of such materials in the classroom;
* they drew attention to the work of Don Holdaway in terms of classroom practice as it affected teachers;
* they offered teachers another strategy, Shared Book Experience, which was well researched and published in a manner that excited teachers with its potential.

Schools became progressively more literature based in their choice of reading materials. This movement was supported yet again by a Holdaway inspired publication, "Core Library".

During the late seventies

The advent of the big book and Core Library was underscored by the publication of further successful titles. Then, in 1979, Holdaway's important work "The Foundations of Literacy" was published. These practical contributions to the educational scene enabled many teachers to make personal leaps in their classroom practices.

The directors of state education in each state of Australia held a meeting in New Zealand and examined teacher training programs in use in New Zealand.

The State Education Department of South Australia issued a memorandum which gave schools autonomy over the development of their curricula subject to the official guidelines. Schools were also given autonomy over the spending of financial allocations for resources.

Curriculum evaluation was the responsibility of the school, in that the school was required to report directly to the client - the parent(s) and child.

The value of standardized tests as useful measuring devices was becoming widely questioned.

During the eighties

As a result of his New Zealand tour, the South Australian Director of Education initiated a study of a New Zealand teacher training system. The recommendations of this study resulted in the development of the Early Literacy Inservice Course (ELIC) and its implementation in 1984. ELIC had a resounding effect on the language arts teaching practices of a great number of junior primary (K-2) teachers. It was regarded as probably the most successful agent for curriculum implementation and change up to that time.

ELIC was later adopted nationally in Australia through the offices of the Curriculum Development Centre in Canberra the national capital. At that time, the Director of the CDC was Mr Garth Boomer, previously one of the most significant agents for change in language arts teaching in South Australia.

By the mid-to-late eighties, individual publishers could no longer claim to dominate the market for reading materials by marketing basals to schools. Spending patterns by individual schools reflected an eclectic approach to selection of materials. No one scheme or program determined a teaching method in a school, but rather, teachers chose materials to fit the curriculum needs of their particular school. In fact anything that was perceived as having the features of a "reader" was generally treated with suspicion.

The Australian Reading Association had become a powerful professional body with an effective communication network of state chapters, a national publication program, and vibrant annual national conventions. This association gave strong support for the grass roots movement in language arts.

Evaluation in schools was increasingly dependent on the teacher's observations, records and samples of children's work. In 1988 the South Australian Education Department set up a project team (WRAP) to conduct a study of and comment on the literacy of 11 and 15 year-old students. The study, over three years, was to provide information to teachers and students about what they have achieved, and inform the system about student achievement in literacy.

Following on the success of ELIC, a teacher training project aimed at teachers of children aged 9-13 years was initiated. The project, Language and Learning In the Middle Years (LLIMY), is a cooperative effort between state and private education authorities within South Australia.

Publishers, teachers and academics (often those associated with major curriculum initiatives) have collaborated to develop a very broad range of valid materials for the classroom. Such collaboration was similar to the experiences of Holdaway and the development of the "big book" in New Zealand.

Out of that melting pot of influences spanning over twenty years, some elements appear to be keys to why teachers en masse were willing and able to break away from dependence on a basal text as the resource for programming and teaching language arts. I believe the key elements can be described under four headings.

1. Empowerment of teachers through the political acceptance of alternatives

Teachers were empowered to change from a centrally driven -- or "top down" -- system, to an autonomous system based on the needs of individual schools and individual pupils, through official recognition of alternatives.

2. Empowerment of teachers through training

Inservice courses, taken on a voluntary basis, recognizing existing practices and supplying support systems for teachers, gave teachers the confidence to embrace change in a professionally satisfying and effective manner.

3. Empowerment through a "grass roots" movement

A drastic change in teacher population through the "baby boomer" influx, brought with it the energy and desire for change. It was not a "top down" change. Teachers wanting to implement change could "ride the wave" rather than have to "paddle upstream".

4. Empowerment of the profession through cooperative effort

Curriculum projects involving the cooperative effort of quite separate education institutions gave strength to the outcome of any project.

The involvement of classroom teachers in the curriculum writing process recognized the value of grass roots input. The "top down" model of curriculum implementation was a thing of the past.

The development of curriculum materials through the cooperative effort of academics, classroom teachers and publishers, resulted in materials that made certain teaching strategies more effective and put teachers more in control of their day-to-day work. It also kept commercial interests bona fide as they were influenced and endorsed by teachers and academics who had to be seen to be true to their teachings.

Somehow these four ingredients (and possibly others) came together and the basal habit was well and truly broken. That is not to say that many in Australia do not continue a call for a return to a centralized curriculum -- but they do so in the face of a well-informed and confident profession.

Nor should it be thought that all is rosy in the Australian educational garden. There is a continuing pursuit of that elusive excellence. Further research continues to offer new insights into ways in which classroom practice can be more effective.

Abandoning the basal does not mean abandoning well-planned, effective teaching of language arts and all those aspects traditionally regarded as the "basics".

Abandoning the basal means ensuring that children meet the various forms of literature in their proper contexts rather than in artificially concocted collections bound in pseudo anthologies for the convenience of publishers.

Abandoning the basal means ensuring that teachers are given adequate training to enable them to confidently embrace alternative strategies.

Abandoning the basal means understanding and accepting language acquisition as an ongoing process, rather than a series of discreet units of mastery with a prescribed end-point; it means working collaboratively with, rather than manipulating, learners and materials.

Abandoning the basal means becoming aware that a range of literature models is required to support an elementary language arts curriculum, and being informed enough about children's literature to be able to make effective selections for any school's needs.